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ABSTRACT

What is the most important moral problem faced by journalists and photographers when they document people's lives? The answer rests in knowing why, how, and when to observe other people. The process of professional observation can be explored by examining photographic books such as Richard Avedon's "In the American West," Bill Owens' "Suburbia," "Good Company" by Douglas Harper, and "Rich and Poor" by Jim Goldberg. Avedon's and Owens' books appear to exploit their photographic subjects. By contrast, the strength in Goldberg's work lies in its intention to be honest and human and to reveal a personal dialectic. In "Good Company," Harper offers a good example of how and when to stare: long and hard but with respect, an open eye, mind, and heart, and a willingness to question's one's own vision, and to stop staring when appropriate. Good observation is interactive and reciprocal, and acknowledges that every observer is privileged to stare and record what is seen. A fifth book, "Illuminations, A Bestiary," which contains photographs by Rosamond Wolff Purcell and text by Stephen Jay Gould, provides further insight. The book portrays dead organisms, yet because of how the observers viewed them, others also can respect, honor, and find parts of themselves in the organisms. (SG)

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THE DIALECTIC OF STARING AS A WAY OF KNOWING

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THE DIALECTIC OF STARING
AS A WAY OF KNOWING

". . . he does not glimpse but frankly, interminably, stare. . . .
one can feel the subject gently holding his breath until the
shutter snaps and the ordeal of being seen is over."

--William Stott

My grandmother always used to say, "It's not polite to stare."

But so much of what we do these days is stare.

Journalists and photographers stare for a living.

Social and behavioral scientists stare for a living.

Many of the people in developed societies stare for lots of reasons--to be entertained, to learn, or just out of curiosity.

Is there a morality to staring?

Is there a time when we should, a time when we shouldn't, a way to stare and a way not to stare?

I think so.

* * *

In a way we're talking about the morality of seeing.

Seeing can be thought of as one of the ways we think. Seeing is a way of knowing, of finding out about our world, of finding out about other people, of finding out about ourselves by watching other people.

Morality has to do with the rightness and wrongness of things. We often try to categorize ideas and actions as right and wrong so they seem clear to us: Either/Or, rather than a continuum of possibilities. Morality is linked with mores, the customs of a group of people. What is right for

one group may be wrong for another. But when we're talking about the morality of seeing, we're talking about something deeper than mores, or morals, or right and wrong. We're talking about life, consciousness, knowing.

The study of morality comes out of the philosophical study of ethics. Some contemporary ethicists have returned to the classical position that the task of ethics is not to determine right and wrong behavior, but to search for meaning in life. Why are we here? Why are we conscious organisms, aware of our selves, of others, of living? How should we live? Many of the words in the volumes produced in the last 24 centuries were written by human beings trying to figure out why we are here and how we should live. Some tell us to live this way or that, or to think about things in this way or that. The heart of the best of the volumes seems to say that we are searching for our *telos*, our purpose, that each person must find that purpose for herself, and that therein lies one's essence.

Science is a peculiar thing. For a long time the world was content for our scientists to be philosophers. If something appeared to be reasonable, surely it was so. Then someone suggested that instead of a world revolving around the earth, the earth was part of a world revolving around the sun. Reason, our primary way of knowing, was challenged by a thinking observer, someone who used his eyes and the rest of his brain in a new way.

Science continues to work that way. The scientific method calls for a plan of observing phenomena in systematic ways to look for cause and effect, for universal laws about the nature of things. If we find the same cause brings about the same effect repeatedly--and others can bring about the same effect in the same way--we say we have made a discovery that supports our hypothesis about how things work. The discovery holds until someone else thinks about the cause-and-effect relationship in a new way and perhaps finds another cause and still yet another effect. This is the method science has developed to determine that we <u>know something</u>.

Art, on the other hand, doesn't worry so much about proving and disproving theories. Art is about making manifest certain aspects of the human soul. In fact art often is respected for being

different, a creation, a new way of seeing or observing or saying or dancing. In this manner, art is a way of knowing.

So much of what we do when we stare is in the name of science or art.

Professional communicators find themselves somewhere between science and art, though they prefer to think they lean toward the supposedly neutral and objective framework of science. But they also are in the business of staring, purportedly for other people. Photojournalists believe it's OK to stare because they are the eyewitnesses for human kind.

But for what are we all searching?

self . . . seen

other . . . seen

self . . . in other

other . . . different

self . . . different

actual people

real people

actuality . . . reality

objective reality . . . objectified reality

subjective reality . . . subjectified reality

a world out there, a world in here

communication in between it all

we study people.

we photograph people.

we put images of people in newspapers and books and on walls.

we read the newspapers and then throw them away.

we read the books and then put them on shelves.

what do we know?

The Question

Volumes have been written about the rights and responsibilities of journalists and scientists, about the roles of art and science, about the objectified self and the nature of observer-observed phenomena. Photographic ethics also is a rapidly growing field. The purpose of this paper is not to elaborate those ideas. The purposes of this paper are to provoke thought and dialogue, to help bring clarity by asking good questions, and perhaps to suggest new perspectives toward answering some of the questions.

The main question prompting this paper is: What is the most important moral problem faced by journalists and photographers when they document the lives of actual people?[1] This paper suggests the answer rests in knowing why, how and when to observe other people. The paper first will define a few key terms and then will discuss some of the issues through four example works of photographic books--two "bad" and two "good."

Moral problem

For this paper, moral problem is defined as the essential ethical issue under consideration. In the introduction we stressed the classical idea that the most appropriate question of ethical study is not "What is right or wrong?", but rather "Why do we live?" or "How should we live?" The main ethical issue then becomes determining the appropriateness of living a life in which staring at or observing others is one's primary task. We might ask the practical question "How should we go about making a photographic record of someone?" We can also ask the epistemological questions: "What do we learn through the process of making a photographic record? How do different ways of making the photograph affect the photograph? What do we say the photograph tells us?" On an ontological level, the question is: "Why do we make the photographs?"

Journalists and Photographers

Journalists and photographers are part of an extended body of human beings who have made their life work the job of watching and reporting what happens in the world. For the current

discussion, I suggest using the term Observer to include journalists, photographers, other professional communicators, as well as social and behavioral scientists, and visual artists. While these groups have different reasons for observing, they all observe with more than ordinary curiosity. Furthermore, a major distinction between Observers and the rest of the world is that Observers don't just look, they make records of their observations and often interpret what they see. Another critical distinction is the concept of separateness. While observation methods often stress participation or even immersion with the observed group, the Observer must be able to separate himself/herself to some extent from what he/she is observing. Anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker notes that this is an essential characteristic of the intellectual: "Often apartness is part of an intellectual's personality and may take diverse forms, among which are the arts as well as the sciences" (1966, p. 21).

Document

To make a record of what one sees in the process of observation. The record can be part of the process or the result of the process. An important part of making the documentary record is the idea that it will serve as evidence of something, that it is authentic, has validity, has a measure of truth. The record can be verbal or visual.

Lives of Actual People

Those individuals whose presences, environments and artifacts are observed and recorded in verbal or visual form. "Actual" usually refers to individuals who live in this world, whether or not they are seen. We consider them to be real, as opposed to individuals who have been created by someone's mind, such as a character in a novel. The distinction is not always clear, however. A great deal has been written about the idea that when we interact with others we are in fact performers. The issue may be one of intention--is the intention to act or to be authentic?

An important point is that the person who is seen or photographed is usually referred to as a "subject." This implies that the person is the object of manipulation and study. Again, a great deal has been written about the complex ideas of the objectification of human beings. This paper

suggests using the term Observed to mean those human beings whose lives and actions we are trying to comprehend through the process of observation and recording.

Photographic Examples

One way to explore these definitions is to examine work in photographic books. The books selected are especially insightful because the image-makers who created them span the fields of journalism, documentary photography, visual social science and art, and because each includes comments by the photographers. We will discuss four books: two "bad"--*In the American West*, by Richard Avedon, and *Suburbia*, by Bill Owens--and two "good"--*Good Company*, by Douglas Harper, and *Rich and Poor*, by Jim Goldberg. Selecting two bad books was difficult, primarily because all images and words can be considered documents of something and therefore have some value. One may not agree with the vision or the message, or the vision may make a viewer very uncomfortable, but all photographs are to some extent documents of the observed, of the observer, and of their interaction. In this vein, both *In the American West* and *Suburbia* are "good" documents--they reveal something about the photographers, about the persons photographed and about the interaction between the photographer and subject.

However, the Observers' intentions in both cases raise serious questions about the nature of How and Why the images were made and What the images reveal.

Avedon's *In the American West*

Avedon's technique for *In the American West* (1985) involved several summers of searching "truck stops, stockyards, walking through the crowds at a fair, looking for faces I wanted to photograph." The process took him and his assistants through 17 states. His research assistant, Laura Wilson, wrote,

> Right from the start, Avedon chose men and women who work at hard, uncelebrated jobs, the people who are often ignored or overlooked. He searched for what he wanted to see and his choices were completely subjective . . . .'This is a fictional West,'

> Avedon has said. 'I don't think the West of these portraits is any more conclusive than the West of John Wayne' (no page numbers).

So we have a search for people who are often not seen--a rationale that appeals to our sense of justice and involves looking for real people. But at the same time we have an image-maker who says his images are not intended to be real.

In his foreword, Avedon describes the portrait-taking event as "silent theater" designed to achieve an illusion: "that everything embodied in the photograph simply happened, that the person in the portrait was always there, was never told to stand there, was never encouraged to hide his hands, and in the end was not even in the presence of a photographer."

Ironically, Avedon's method of making portraits is akin to the scientific method of neutral observation. Avedon says his method is to stand the subject against a sheet of white paper secured to a wall or other structure and to photograph him or her in diffuse light that won't "tell you where to look." "I want the source of light to be invisible so as to neutralize its role in the appearance of things," he says. Avedon uses an 8x10 Deardorf camera with the help of two assistants who change film holders and check exposures so fast that "[s]ometimes he works as quickly as if he were using a 35mm camera." Using the large format is another authenticating procedure--the real world is rendered in exquisite detail. Avedon explains that he stands "next to the camera, not behind it, several inches to the left of the lens and about four feet from the subject," as if to say, "I don't interfere." Yet, he continues,

> As I work I must imagine the pictures I am taking because, since I do not look through the lens, I never see precisely what the film records until the print is made. I am close enough to touch the subject and there is nothing between us except what happens as we observe one another during the making of the portrait. This exchange involves manipulations, submissions [emphasis added]. Assumptions are reached and acted upon that could seldom be made with impunity in ordinary life.

Avedon calls this process "silent theater" and talks about the manipulative but interdependent nature of the portrait session:

> A portrait photographer depends upon another person to complete his picture. The subject imagined, which in a sense is me, must be discovered in someone else willing to take part in a fiction he cannot possibly know about [emphasis added]. My concerns are

> not his. We have separate ambitions for the image. His need to plead his case probably goes as deep as my need to plead mine, but the control is with me.

Avedon even articulates the ambiguity he has set up, maintaining that when photographed, a fact or emotion becomes an opinion: "All photographs are accurate. None of them is the truth."

Avedon plays with his subjects and therefore with us, the viewers, and the way we come to understand what is real. Challenging our way of knowing is a good thing to do, but playing with subjects, especially with people who appear to be so miserable, is not so good. Much of Avedon's discussion of method reveals how he uses other people as actors in this "silent theater" to get the images he wants. It's as if their essences are sacrificed during his ritual of portrait theater. Avedon leads us in this interpretive direction by including portraits of slaughtered animals among the portraits of people. Both people and animals are creatures in Avedon's black frames, specimens for perusal.

We cannot know how much of this was understood by those reflecting light for Avedon, but we do have information about one subject. Wilson writes of one portrait session involving a woman encountered in the cafeteria of a mental hospital in Las Vegas, Nev.:

> A woman entered the cafeteria, taking three steps at a time, then stopping until she counted from one to ten. She was in her mid-thirties and wore a white blouse and blue pantsuit. No one interfered with her, but the time she spent to take such precise steps used up most of her lunch period. Avedon asked if might take a picture of her. She wore, for the portrait, a silver rosary around her neck. After the sitting, she sat and talked with us quietly. The assistants took several Polaroids to give to her. Avedon handed her the most flattering one. She asked to see the others, and looked carefully at each picture. "Does this look like me?" She held out a close-up of just her face, distorted and blurred by the automatic focus of the Polaroid. "This is the best one of me," she said. "It's how I feel." This woman at least thought she was involved in something authentic.

But we don't get to see the blurred image, or the others.

Many of Avedon's portraits are rude and exploitative, yet also quite remarkable--that is what is so disturbing. "Juan Patricio Lobato, carney," silhouettes a slouched young man in black against a glaring white background that sets off the glaring white of his eyes. He stares at us with the distrust and a woundedness of a hunted creature. A haunted, distrustful stare, the fear of being

seen, a defiance comes through in the eyes of many of those in Avedon's images. A few, such as "Emory J. Stovall, scientist," stare with less vulnerability and more a sense of "Let's just do this."

A final problem is how the work enters the dialectic of human consciousness through the exhibitions, collections and the book--how it is understood and remembered, how it influences our view of the world. The people Avedon selected to play the roles in his fictional West stare interminably from the pages of the book. They are grim, often baring their skin as if to say, "This is the real me." But Avedon tells us this is all fiction. Do the viewers, the new observers, believe "this is all fiction," or that "this is real"? Avedon has written a version of Western culture that may or may not be true, but that impresses on our minds a grim form of reality. His intention is to perplex.

Does the perception that those Observed were not respected come about because they were indeed exploited, or is it just the way this viewer sees them as they stare out of the pages of a book?

Bill Owens' *Suburbia*

> This book is about my friends and the world I live in.
> In the fall of 1968 I began working as photographer for the Livermore (California) Independent. My daily routine took me into the homes of hundreds of families and into contact with the social life of three suburban communities.
> The people I met enjoy the life-style of the suburbs. They have realized the American Dream. They are proud to be home owners and to have achieve material success.
> To me nothing seems familiar, yet everything was very, very familiar.
> At first I suffered from culture shock. I wanted to photograph everything, thousands of photographs. Then slowly I began to put my thoughts and feelings together and to document Americans in suburbia. It took two years.
> The photos in this book express the lives of the people I know. The comments on each photograph are what the people feel about themselves.

That is the preface to *Suburbia*. Simple. "The photos in this book express the lives of the people I know."

The book was published in 1972. Six years and two books later Owens published another book titled *documentary photography, a personal view*, in which he explains his method:

> The suburbs of Livermore, California were something of a shock to me. Everyone there lives 'the good life,' which means having attractive homes, high paying jobs, swimming pools and shiny cars. I decided to do a documentary project on the suburbs--a visual/anthropological view America (p. 15).

Owens' original title was *Instant America*: "I felt then that the word 'suburbia' had negative connotations. . . ." Owens says he

> . . . was truly interested in how the middle class lived and felt about themselves. And I felt that if people could become aware of their life styles in some way, and have a better appreciation of it, they could change it for the better [emphasis added]. I could hardly believe that an American family might spend as much as $350 a year on the care and feeding of the family pet!" (p. 17).

The idea of making pictures to help change people's lives is a recurring theme in documentary photography and it often comes from the heart of the Observer. Yet here it is a paternalistic, chauvenistic attitude that implies Owens knows what his subjects need--and they need to be different than what they are.

Owens' method grew out of his position with a local newspaper. He had easy access to the community and eventually even put an ad in the paper, asking people to call him to have their pictures made. Owens spent varying amounts of time with his subjects. Some people he visited "six to ten times" before he "found *the* interesting photograph." With others he spent "only ten minutes" before coming up with "a suitable photograph." (p. 16). Owens' general rules were:

1. Be familiar with the your subject
2. Watch professional photographers at work
3. Photograph your subjects from more than one position
4. Get the overview
5. Ask permission to take a photograph
6. Dress appropriately
7. Shoot a lot of film
8. Always carry extra rolls of film

Owens worked with large-format hand-held cameras, 6x7 and 2-1/4 x 2-3/4mm, which gave his images technical clarity.

Owens introduced his work by saying, "The photos in this book express the lives of the people I know." Yet he spent only 10 minutes with some of the people. In addition, his approach was commercial. His book on documentary photography spends three of the 63 pages discussing

"the documentary photograph," which he explains "must go beyond being simply a record of an event, and make a clear statement about the subject and his situation." The rest of the book is about how to make it in the business of documentary photography and photojournalism.

The book lacks heart and depth. Owens dedicates *Suburbia* to his wife, to the businessman who helped him begin the project and "to the people of the Livermore Amador Valley. It's your book." Yet he explains that he was out to become a famous photographer.

Even when Owens' suggestions appear to be ethical concerns, such as his recommendation that photographers always ask permission, his motivations are primarily manipulative:

> Unless it's absolutely essential to the assignment, don't catch people unawares when taking their photographs. Common courtesy is a factor here, but also many a photographer has been yelled at or even physically attacked for doing just that. . . . Courtesy is just good business. Be friendly and thank your subjects for allowing you to photograph them. This policy can save time and complications if, at a later time, you need to have a photo release form signed.

The book is full of humor, information, the variety of human existence in the suburbs. But one gets the uneasy feeling throughout that, again, the people are being exploited. We never know what role they consciously play in creating the sarcastic, satirical tone of the observations.

Are the people in the images laughing with us, or do we join Bill Owens in laughing <u>at</u> them, rather than looking <u>with</u> them to see what we can learn about the essence of being human through the images. The work is more a form of entertainment than authentic observation. The method was hasty and lacked substantive intention.

<u>Now for the good news: Goldberg's *Rich and Poor*</u>

Jim Goldberg's *Rich and Poor* (1985) is just as deeply rooted in a search for meaning as *Suburbia* is superficial.

On first glance, the book appears similar to *Suburbia* in an intrusive way. But as one reads each image and each person's words, the depth of the book unfolds. The work has heart,

substance, and the verbal and visual messages indicate that Goldberg talked with those he observed, spent time with them and was concerned about them.

Harold Graham, for example, stands in front of a doorway marked "Empty." Graham writes: "Now I see a way out to a deceant future. I'm tired of this shit, Drugs and pimpin and all that stuff Maybe now I have the courage to do something--anything. I dont know, we will see. Jim Thanks. (P.S.) I love you" [sic] (no page numbers).

Robert L. Mitchell, also in front of a doorway, writes:

> Jim you ARe a swell guy But you Just seem TO come At The wRong Time THANK Alot Your FRiEND Rob.
> I AM Sick OF stRuggling I Feel ABout myselF in picture THAt I Look LiKe A PpRoud Bull iN A AReNA stANding tAll HAVing KNow FeAR oF AnyTHiNg. LiFe is good But it is How you TReat It. Right NOW it isn't TreAting Me not So well.

And Corinne Soliel, standing in her flowered kimono in her marbled and mirrored bathroom:

> To Jim, many thanks for this unforgettable experience It made me think about my life and how beautiful it is. Much love & good luck, Corinne.
> I have such good memories in this room, of getting dressed up, of making myself look as pretty and young as I could.
> Most of the time I would like the results--I like the results in this picture.
> I see a little sadness in this photo.
> I am getting older now--what can I do?
> Corinne Soliel

The book opens with a self portrait, titled "ME AND JOHN, 1977." It shows a darkly bearded, bushy haired, white male with his hands draped closely around the arm of an elderly man. We immediately become aware of the person who framed the images. And we see him embracing someone within a frame. The stage is set for intimacy.

Goldberg ends the book with a thoughtfully moving Afterword in which he states, "I always wanted to be somebody else." He talks about his desire "to try to somehow to help change the world as I saw it." Goldberg says the work began when he stumbled onto "the world of transient hotels." He continues: "On each floor was a line of closed doors which opened, as I soon discovered, on a world I had never seen on the street."

The Dialectic of Staring, p.14

> They seemed to like me, and enjoyed the fact that I gave them photographs. I wanted to believe that my picture-taking, our conversations, could somehow help. This fit with the tradition I believed I was a part of , the social documentary school of photography. I believed that as an outsider I could enter a world different from my own, process "information," and somehow create for other outsiders a better understanding of a life we either refuse to see or are ignorant of. And I believed that having my subjects write on the photographs would bring an added immersion, a deeper truth (no page numbers).

Goldberg writes of his intention to show the stark but hopeful reality of the people he photographed: "My ideas about the world of the hotel people, and theirs about mine, shaped the stories we constructed from picture and words. I was trying to portray the reality of what I saw; what we did in those first pictures was collaborate in creating a myth of noble poverty."

After several months, however, he realized his rationale had to change: "My sense of their powerlessness and of my own helplessness to offer them a way out created a pain that was difficult to accept." He felt exhausted by the confrontation between his sense of the American dream with the reality he found.

So he decided to photograph the rich. But this was not so easy either.

"It had been easy to compare myself with the poor and think better of myself. It was much more difficult with the wealthy: it's hard to confront the reality of the dreams we have been conditioned to dream." Nevertheless, he sought to "get beyond the negative stereotypes of the rich and show them as human beings, quite like you and me."

Goldberg describes the long process of his work, which involved meeting with people, photographing them, returning with proofs, returning with final prints, interviewing, and then having them write on the prints. "It might take a year or longer before I got to the final stage."

Goldberg notes feeling "the guilt that comes from using people for one's own purposes," and of a growing sense of empathy with his "rich subjects" while also coming to sense "the deeper manifestations of false superiority that this society encourages (through the institution of class)," and how "power based on wealth crippled people in the most human ways. . . ."

Goldberg then returned to the hotels and was repulsed by the "angry, impotent, bitter, desperate people" he saw. "Passively, they waited. . . ." He questioned his own motives, his own sense of what he saw and how he could influence the viewer's image as well.

> I know how I have used the role of photographer to stand apart and separate myself from both rich and poor. . . .In a way my work is an agreement to internalize my own questions, well-meaning motives, and doubts, and then project them not only on to my willing subjects but ultimately on to you, the viewer, with the hope of affecting something (you).

Goldberg goes on to give his Marxist, hegemonic theory of why the world is the way it is. Yet he does not lose his idealism, his sense that something can still be done. "The stories most of us believe are actually the antithesis of what we should be taught. . . . This is why I thought it was important to attempt to understand my subjects, to see 'how they think' . . . . He concludes with a challenge to us, as Observers:

> Although these photographs are my and my collaborators' interpretation of their myths (and mine), you now become their next interpreters. . . .We need new models, new stories. Somehow, instead of accepting the idea that we are powerless victims, we need to become strategists in constructing more visionary tales for others and ourselves.

The strength of this work is Goldberg's intention to be honest, his intention to be human, his revelation of his personal dialectic. He spent time with the people he photographed, he observed and they observed. He did not accept his own first view of the world he entered. Observer and observed collaborated--and then the viewer is invited to join the process. This is sensitive, intelligent art and science, based on the interactive process of good observation.

Harper's *Good Company*

The fourth book for discussion is *Good Company* by visual sociologist Douglas Harper (1982).

Harper writes of beginning his study of hobos and tramps by using long lenses to photograph them from a distance. "The project began as a photographic essay on the life of the skid row man, and my motivation initially was to make 'good photographs' of the most desperate looking individuals I could find on the streets of Boston's skid row." He said his early research strategies were intended primarily to protect my extensive and expensive photographic paraphernalia in settings where it was likely to stolen." The result of a year's work was "a number of good photographs," but little knowledge of the lives of those he photographed (Harper, 1979, p. 26).

Harper then decided to take on the "outside trappings of a skid row man" and enter the culture for a couple of weeks--without camera or money.

"The world looked different from the inside looking out, and after this experience I felt I had begun to pay my dues as a field worker," Harper noted. He continued the participant observation process, even to the extent of hopping on trains to ride with the men. Harper said he learned that experiencing the lives of the men was more important to him than producing documents about them. "I passed up photographs I desperately wanted when the act of photographing would be alien, disruptive, and totally out of context with what I had become" (Ibid., p 27).

The result was an informed view, not only of the lives of some of the homeless, but also of the way photographic realities are shaped. Harper points out that a person who looks at some of his photographs can easily interpret them in familiar ways: "destitution, dereliction, and severe personal disorganization, the same 'themes' which have guided traditional social science research in this area." His experience, however, taught him "a great deal about the relationship between

how we 'image' this deviant group and how they image themselves" (Ibid.). His work revealed such themes as the tramps' strong, positive sense of an independent self.

As an example of the importance of careful, open, informed viewing, Harper points to a photograph of a grizzly looking, snaggle-toothed man; traditional interpretation would be one of desperation. Harper suggests we note the man's carefully combed hair and evenly trimmed beard as "visual cues" indicating "that he has presented his face to the world in a manner which he has determined" (Ibid., pp. 38-39).

Harper writes about his concerns that he was exploiting the tramp's condition "for whatever ends I've chosen," and justified his early work "--as many social scientists have justified their 'portrayals' of poverty--through my hope that the public or academic record would be an initiator of social change." He notes that he now believes "one's motives, even when altruistic in some sense, cannot be used to explain away means which are essentially exploitative" (Ibid., p. 41).

These are issues of how, what and why. Harper criticizes photographs that come from "momentary encounters with strangers" that result in perpetrating "superficial human interaction." He suggests forming genuine relationships over a period of time and becoming "less an outsider and less a stranger." Harper writes that after traveling with tramps through several trips and immersing himself in their world, "In some sense I began to feel that I had the ethical right to tell their story, for it had become in part my own" (Ibid.).

In *Good Company*, Harper conscientiously explains how he obtained his data and photographed those with whom he traveled. He writes of times when the camera was left behind: ". . . for me the rights and desires of the individuals we choose as subjects are more important than a final purpose that would justify making images when they would not be welcome" (1982, p. 147).

Harper also maintains that the photographs serve two functions in the book: 1) "a visual inventory of typical behaviors in typical spaces" and 2) "documents portraying the development of my relations with those I studied" (Ibid., pp. 145-146).

In the Afterword to *Good Company*, Howard Becker writes that the book is "an exemplar . . . of how this kind of knowledge might be presented so that the presentation contains what the researchers came to know in such a way that the reader can share the knowledge" (Ibid., p 171).

Good Company is, then, a good example of how and when to stare: long and hard but with participatory respect, an open eye, mind and heart, and with a willingness to question one's own vision--and to stop staring when appropriate. The book also is important because its author questions why he observed.

"Good" Observation

Good observation considers how and why we look at others and what we look for. Good observation is an interactive, reciprocal venture in which the reality framed in the image is the result of a collaborative process. Good observation considers the looking process as important as the "reality out there" that is framed. It considers the rights and responsibilities of both the Observer and the Observed: to participate actively and consciously, to be as honest as possible. It considers the relationship between the Observer and the Observed to be reciprocal, equal, and the reality that is recorded to be one that is constructed in collaboration.

Good observation acknowledges that every Observer is privileged--someone who has set himself/herself apart--not just to watch, but to stare and to record what is seen. Good observation also acknowledges that everyone is Observer and everyone is Observed. Both Observer and Observed are active. Whether the resulting document is considered art, science or journalism probably doesn't matter in the long run. Much of the power of any image is that it enters the continuum of images over time, contributing to our individual and collective understanding of life.

A special irony of journalism is that subjects are also sources; yet in the process of obtaining information, in the pursuit of objectivity, we often assume privileges of observation that deny subjects their inherent rights to be seen as equal, living human beings. Photojournalists assume they have not only the right but the obligation to stare, to strip the subject of his so-called mask. This paper does not quarrel with the idea that many times we need to see bare-faced images. The paper does question the prevalent assumption that professional observers, particularly journalists and social scientists, have the right to stare bold-facedly.

A Fifth Book

We can gain further insight into this difficulty with a book documenting subjects that, interestingly, are dead. Stephen Jay Gould seeks to meld art and science, to heal the dichotomy, in his text accompanying photographs by Rosamond Wolff Purcell. The book is called, appropriately, *Illuminations, A Bestiary* (1986). Gould writes that the book

> is about a particular mode of interaction with organisms, a path known only to professionals, and therefore all the more instructive because hidden from public view. This book gathers its material from the back rooms of museums; it captures attitudes expressed in the way we store and collect organisms that are not on public display. This book is about information lost in partial preservation, and dimensions added by treatment that exposes, in ways all the more telling because unconscious, our intimate connections with all life (Purcell and Gould, pp. 10-11).

Gould notes that he believes organisms have "an irreducible and inalienable status in and for themselves. But we can only speak of them in terms of their meaning for us; culture and mind permeate our world of discourse." (p. 11) He continues: "These photographs speak of layers of data lost, and meaning added--a meaning that records interaction based upon our own limitations, not an emanation from the animal itself" (pp. 11-12).

The creatures are dead. They cannot participate actively in the photographic process. Yet somehow they do. Their physical presence, as seen through the eyes of a scientist and an artist, communicates the power and grace of life. Even before they were photographed, these creatures were specimens, preserved for the centuries, much as creatures in photographs are preserved for

future inspection. Yet because of how the Observers viewed them, we,too, can respect them, honor them, even find parts of ourselves in them. And they stare back at us.

Conclusion

The mission of photography is to explain man to man and each to himself. And that is the most complicated thing on earth and almost as naive as a tender plant.
--Edward Steichen, *U.S. Camera*

The Sufis say that transcendence comes when one discovers oneself in the Other and, in the idiom of the West, does not merely project oneself into the Other to discover, mirabile dictu, only oneself there.
--from *Tuhami*

Most of the work I have discussed has been photography in which the individuals in the frame look directly into the lens--and therefore out of the photograph and into the eyes of the viewer.

My final question is this: Who is staring at whom? Who is Observer and whom is Observed--the one in the photograph, the one making the photograph, or the one viewing the photograph?

The journalist, the social scientist, the artist--all those who stare in order to know--have a choice: to stare with little regard for the human creature they observe, or to stare with the understanding that the best way to study someone may be to keep a careful eye on oneself and when possible, to invite the subject's participation in the dialectic of staring.

Good observation advances human consciousness to the best of the ability of the Observer and the Observed--and it invites, entreats, beckons the viewer to enter the dialectic of staring as a way of knowing, and becoming.

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[1]This question was first put to me in this form by William Stott. I thank him for it. Sometimes knowing the right question is more important than thinking we have an answer.